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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL

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SUBJECT: HELMAND PROVINCE - POPPY ERADICATION FORCE'S PRE-PLANTING CAMPAIGN HAS GOOD START

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) conducted a pre-planting outreach campaign in Helmand Province from August 29 through September 5, 2007. The PEF organized two well-attended Shuras with area elders and met with numerous farmers in the Lashkargah area. No security incidents occurred, and the PEF team was well received by Helmand residents. Farmers expressed support of the outreach effort but said they were disappointed with GoA efforts to support alternative agriculture programs and with the slow pace of development in Lashkargah. END SUMMARY.

PEF Campaign Off to a Good Start

¶12. (SBU) The PEF conducted a pre-planting outreach campaign in Helmand province from August 29 through September 5. The PEF Commander, General Ahmad Zai, delivered a consistent message at two large Shuras attended by hundreds of Helmand residents: the PEF would conduct a poppy eradication campaign in Helmand Province, and Helmand farmers must stop poppy cultivation and move to alternative agriculture production. The Deputy Governor, Haji Pir Mohammad, and Helmand Chief of Police General Andiwol delivered strong counternarcotics (CN) messages to support the PEF, telling shura attendees that increased poppy production contributed to the instability in Helmand and that further development was unlikely without a reduction in poppy production.

Helmand Residents Respond

¶13. (SBU) Residents welcomed the chance to discuss the issue with GoA authorities. Some attendees expressed anger at the GoA for its failure to deliver on previous promises and said they were disappointed at the slow pace of development in Helmand. Many admitted the choice to grow poppy was simply about earning more money for their crops and said they were unwilling to stop planting poppy until either the GoA or the international community provided significant subsidies to grow alternative agriculture. Some of the most vocal elders accused the GoA of collusion with the narco-traffickers and said that poppy production would not decrease in Helmand until the central government fulfilled previous promises. The crowd applauded the comments against the central government and supported calls for greater assistance from the GoA.

Comment

14. (SBU) The PEF pre-planting public outreach operation in Helmand was well-organized, and coordination between PEF and the PRT was very good. Hundreds of area residents attended the public forums and engaged the PEF in lively debates about current operations and previous GoA efforts. This pre-planting outreach effort put hundreds of Helmand farmers on notice that eradication forces will be back in 2007-08, which could increase the risk of growing poppy and might move some farmers towards alternative agriculture production. However, many Helmand farmers are clearly frustrated at the GoA and want significant development and agricultural support before they halt poppy production.
END COMMENT.